

14 August 2016

The Vineyard
Isaiah 5:1-7; Mark 12:1-12

This summer we've spent time in Jesus' parables. But Jesus didn't invent the parable form. He learned it through his study of the Hebrew Scriptures. We read today a parable of Isaiah of Jerusalem, found in Isaiah 5, verses 1-7:

*Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.
And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.
What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?
And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.
For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry!*

I should give you the historical context of this parable. Isaiah of Jerusalem prophesied in the Kingdom of Judah, in its capital city Jerusalem, seven hundred years before Christ. Jerusalem was the pride of the nation, with its magnificent two-hundred year old temple, which was a center for huge annual festivals, when pilgrims brought offerings to sacrifice on the altar there. The priestly class, which performed those sacrifices as well as led festival singing, had immense power. They and the nobility of Jerusalem grew very wealthy. But even as a few grew wealthy, others lived in abject poverty. Meanwhile, outside Judah, there were other problems. A new empire was rising in the north, which historians today call the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and Judah and its other small, independent neighbors were engaged in all sorts of diplomatic intrigue and military alliances to face the Assyrian threat.

In that context, the prophet Isaiah had two basic messages for the people. First, stop trying to save yourself with alliances and armies. God who made a covenant with Judah would protect it if the people would simply trust. And second, focus instead on what had always been

the people's part of that covenant: care for the helpless and keep the laws of Moses. As Isaiah says in chapter one, speaking for God:

*Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.
When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*

This is the Isaiah who told the simple parable you just heard. "Let's sing a love song, a song about my beloved, who planted a vineyard. He cleared the ground, planted choice vines, grew a hedge and built a wall to keep out animals, dug a cistern from which he could water the vines. He did everything to make his vineyard fruitful and good. And what happened? The vines produced sour, wild, unusable grapes. My beloved had left nothing undone! Who can explain the vines' stubborn refusal to bear the fruit they were planted to produce?"

"So what will my beloved do? He will abandon his vineyard. Without his hedge, the vines will be devoured. Without his weeding and pruning, it will be overgrown with thorns. Without his watering, it will shrivel and die. Because my beloved looked for good fruit, and it produced trash. He looked for justice (Hebrew: *mishpat*), but behold, bloodshed (*mishpah*). He looked for righteousness (*tsedakah*) and behold, a cry of anguish (*tse'akah*)."

It is hard to overstate how radical this parable is, declaring as it does that God's "chosen people" – people of the covenant, with the temple towering in their midst as the monument to their chosenness – could be *unchosen*. Isaiah seems to say that there is no nation, no people, no shrine, no institution, no faith that has a guarantee. When God chose Israel, it was not to establish a monument. No, God planted a vineyard – and vineyards are supposed to bear fruit.

* * *

Jesus also told a parable about a vineyard. In fact, he starts it off exactly as Isaiah started his, using almost identical language. Jesus' version is found in Mark 12, verses 1-12. Please stand for the reading of the holy Gospel:

Then [Jesus] began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, and beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent another slave to them; this one they beat over the head and insulted. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But those tenants said to

one another, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture:

*"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?"*

When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

The historical background to this is more familiar to us than the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem. In Jesus' day, Judea was not a prosperous, independent nation; it was a backwater colony of the cruel Roman Empire. But there was still a magnificent temple in Jerusalem, which was still the center of pilgrimage and sacrifice, and the priests who ran the temple worship were still rich and powerful. You see, like most colonial empires, Rome rewarded those conquered people who collaborated with them. The Jerusalem priests were permitted to run their religion as they chose so long as they remained loyal to Rome, so once again there was a wealthy elite in Jerusalem, surrounded by crowds of the oppressed and impoverished.

To the people of Judea, Jesus had a simple message, and it was nearly identical to Isaiah's. First, stop putting your faith in the institutions of religion, which harbor hypocrisy and pride. And second, focus instead on doing what had always been the people's part of the covenant: keep the laws of Moses and care for the vulnerable. Remember this story from Luke 4, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry: *When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

This is the Jesus who told his version of Isaiah's parable: "A man planted a vineyard. He did everything necessary to make it fruitful: cleared the ground, built a wall around it, dug a winepress, planted good vines. Then he rented it to tenant farmers. The land produced well, but the tenant farmers refused to give the owner his share of the fruit. No matter how many servants the owner sent, requesting his rent, the tenants refused. They beat some, and killed others. Finally he sent his own son, and the tenants even killed him. What do you think the owner will do to those tenants? He'll take the vineyard from them and give it to others."

These two parables should terrify the Church. Not just today but in every age. They express in slightly different terms the same uncomfortable teaching. There is no privilege associated with being God's people: God has placed us on earth to bear fruit. Furthermore, that "fruit" is *not* what American Christianity thinks it is. We have interpreted "bearing fruit" in terms of our own culture and understood it as increasing our share of the religious marketplace, adding new franchises, and getting bigger and richer. But Isaiah and Jesus could not be more clear what bearing fruit means: righteousness in our own lives and justice in our society, *especially* for the most vulnerable members of our society. And here's the terrifying part: if we *don't* bear that fruit, or if we enrich ourselves with the fruit that God's vineyard produces, then God will move on. God will leave us to our own devices and let us get overrun with weeds. If we don't bear the fruit of justice and righteousness, God will find someone else.

It sometimes feels as if this is already happening, but here's the good news. We don't have to fix the church ourselves. In fact, we can't. All of our meetings and strategic plans and conferences are exactly as worthless as all of Judah's military alliances and all Judea's institutional weight. If we trust God, we will be saved. In the meantime, bear the fruit of righteousness and justice and care for the weak. That's all.